



Recipes of Pain: Tracing Trauma in the Culinary Rhetoric of Laura Esquivel's *Like Water For Chocolate*



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ABSTRACT

Trauma is derived from a Greek word which means 'wound'. Previously, it was confined to physical wounds alone. But later, as rightly observed by Roger Luckhurst, trauma began to connote psychic scars as well. Sigmund Freud describes trauma as “any excitation from outside which are powerful enough to break the [mind's] protective shield” (Beyond the Pleasure Principle 23). According to psychoanalysis, all mental agonies result from the fantasies and unsettled clashes of one's childhood. Trauma, by its very nature, being unrepresentable, Artists and writers try a variety of strategies to represent trauma which defies representation through conventional means. This paper analyses Laura Esquivel's novel *Like Water for Chocolate* as a means of addressing trauma through various recipes that the protagonist makes. It also explores how the culinary discourse of the novel transcends the limits of language to communicate the inner torments of a traumatized individual. *Like Water for Chocolate* revolves around the life of Tita De La Garza, the youngest daughter of a Mexican family. She gets agonized by the futile attempts to marry her lover. Justly subtitled as “A Novel in Monthly Installments with Recipes, Romances, and Home Remedies”, the novel foregrounds Tita's strong bonds with kitchen, recipes and food as the only means to let out her emotions. The paper also aims at highlighting the innovative techniques of culinary therapy to deal with the trauma of the victims.

Keywords: Trauma, recipes, culinary discourse, food, pain

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The evolution of trauma studies can be traced since its drift from physical to psychical realm. Trauma involves deep psychic scars resulting either from various catastrophes like the Holocausts, Wars or from the shock of rape, accidents, loss of loved ones etc. Either way, trauma is associated with a loss. According to the earlier studies on trauma by Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer, the victim gets haunted by traumatic memory, a foreign body actively at work long after its entry. The traumatic memory resides in the unconscious dominion of the individual yet causing significant impact on his/her senses.

In the essay “Mourning and Melancholy”, Freud describes two types of responses to the lost object – Mourning and Melancholia. In the former, the victim realizes the loss, accepts it and tries to do away with it. But in the later, the

lost object is held to the ego, becomes a part of it whereby the victim identifies with the loss. This makes him/her overwhelmed with the trauma of the lost object. Hence for Freud, mourning is preferred to melancholia as a means to

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Received on 20/02/2019 Accepted on 25/02/2019 © HEB All rights reserved	

work out the loss. Following Freud, Jacques Derrida came forth with his theories on loss. For him, the traumatized individual acts as a site wherein the loss is fostered. Derrida calls this site the archive, a store house of the past and its memories. Though the archive seems to be a place of conservation, it can be destructive as well. It reinforces the bond between the subject and the lost object, making it difficult for his/her self to disengage with it.

Traumatized individual will resort to various mechanisms as a mean to redress their agony. It can range from being silent to self-destructive behaviors. Even narrativizing the traumatic event has proved to be an effective therapy to accept the loss. The novel *Like Water for Chocolate* chronicles the life of Tita and her ways of dealing with her trauma.

In order to make up for the inarticulatory power of language in narrativizing trauma, novelists adopt various experimental narrative strategies. It can range from employing plurality of narrative voices, interlinking present and the past, incorporating graphic elements and colors, so on and so forth. Laura Esquivel's novel *Like Water for Chocolate* has its own innovative style of narration. Rightly subtitled as 'A novel in Monthly Installments with Recipes, Romances and Home Remedies', each chapter is named after each month of the year and begins with a recipe. The recipes featured add to the structure of the novel and the chapters deal with either preparation or consumption of these recipes. The novel tells the story of Tita which is unveiled through flashbacks narrated by her great niece of the same name.

The novel begins at the wake of the twentieth century with the birth of Tita De La Garza as the youngest daughter of a Mexican family. It is said that Tita was so sensitive to onions even when she was in her mother's womb. Once, her wailing was so loud that she had to be delivered prematurely. The opening scene takes place in the kitchen, where Tita's birth takes place. She was "literally washed into this world on a great tide of tears" (10). After two days of her birth, her father died of heart attack. Her mother, Mama Elena, was deeply traumatized by the death of her husband so much so that her milk dried up. Elena fails to nurse the child and so she entrusts the house cook, Nancha, to look after Tita. Completely secluded in the four walls of the kitchen, Tita could only relate to the world around her in connection with food. The first pages of the novel succeed in giving a tone of melancholia and isolation. Both trauma and intensity of an event is brought about by the use of magical realism- Tita gushing out from her mother's womb on a great tide of tears, tears when dried up supplied ten pounds of salt for cooking, etc. Tita's birth on tears is clearly indicative of dreadful trauma that she is yet to face in her life.

In course of time, she falls in love with her neighbor, Pedro. But Mama Elena rebukes the affair stating that the youngest daughter of the Mexican household should stay unmarried so as to take care of her mother in old age. Tita could do nothing but to conform to her mother's orders. Mama Elena, on the other hand, fixes the marriage of her second daughter, Rosaura with Pedro. Pedro agreed to the alliance only in the hope that he can remain close to Tita.

Mama Elena's decision shocks Tita to such a great extent that her favorite food Christmas Roll couldn't help her. She couldn't accept the news: "Tita felt her body fill with a wintry chill: in one sharp, quick blast she was so cold and dry her cheeks burned and turned red, red as the apples beside her. That overpowering chill lasted a long time..." (17). There are many instances in the novel where Tita has to face this grievous sense of cold. It can be seen as the physical manifestation of her wounded psyche. Her trauma induces insomnia, a condition prior to PTSD as observed by many psychologists.

The second chapter starts with the baking of Chabela Wedding Cake for Pedro's and Rosaura's wedding. As Nancha and Tita bake the cake, Tita is haunted by hallucinations as she fails to express herself. Nancha consoles her and asks her to vent out her feelings. "She felt that Tita was on the verge of nervous collapse, though she didn't know the word for Tita's condition, she was wise enough to realize that Tita could not go on" (31). This instance clearly marks the disarticulatory power of language to express one's inner turmoil. The event also exemplifies trauma being defined as a void in the psyche, an unexplainable feeling to both the victim and the person who attends him/her. On Nancha's advice, Tita could somehow weep. Both of them wept until there were no tears in Tita's eyes. Then, Tita continued to weep without tears.

One of the prominent features of trauma narratives is its use of symbols. Symbols, similes and metaphors are more personal as they tend to express the inner feelings of the individual than signifying their meanings. In the novel, on seeing the

white sheet for the wedding night, Tita stood in trance for a few seconds staring at the whiteness of the sheet. She felt as if she stared at it for long as it caused a sort of blindness. For Tita, the white color symbolizes the purity of her love. It can also stand for her chastity which she is forced to maintain till death. The whiteness continues to haunt her as the white granulated sugar frightened her while she made the icing for the cake.

She felt powerless against it, feeling that at any moment the white color might seize her mind, dragging along those snow-white images from her childhood, May-time images of being taken all in white, to offer white flowers to the Virgin. She entered the church in a row of girls all dressed in white and approached the altar, which was covered with white candles and flowers, illuminated by a heavenly white light streaming through the stained-glass window of the white church. Never had she entered that church, not once, without dreaming of the day she would enter it on the arm of a man. (34)

Tita's tears fell on the icing which Nancha noticed. She kissed her and pushed her out of the kitchen. Nancha assured herself that the cake has not been spoiled with Tita's tears. But when she licked the icing off her fingers, she was overwhelmed with a strange longing. It made her think of all the cakes she had baked for the De La Garza family hoping that the next cake would be for her marriage. She sobs at her futile dreams of getting married though she had a fiancé. Thus, Tita's trauma of love and marriage is not only communicated but is felt by Nancha through the food that she prepares. This dissemination of grief seems to be more personal, transcending the syntactic and semantic boundaries of language in expressing trauma. Tita's tears on the cake caused continuous vomiting among the wedding guests, whoever ate it. They were also haunted by a loss. The cake thus becomes the transmitter of her sense of loss, inner sorrow and pain. Vomiting ruins the wedding party as well as Rosaura's white dress symbolizing the impurity of the marriage. The wedding day also saw Nancha lying dead, holding a photograph of her fiancé. This makes Tita all alone in the kitchen.

The only way for Tita to vent out her emotions is to engage in cooking. Pedro gifted her rose with which she made Quail in Rose Petal sauce. Even the killing of quail is symbolic: "Pedro and Rosaura's marriage had left Tita broken in both heart and in mind, like the quail. To spare the quail the pain she felt, Tita moved sharply and decisively, finishing him off as an act of mercy" (47). As Tita was overcome by love and passion towards Pedro while making the sauce, the same emotions get conveyed to people whoever drank it. Gertrudis, Tita's younger sister dripped with pink color sweat and her body smelled like roses. Her body radiated so much heat that water from shower evaporated before it reached her. Gertrudis then opts a lustful path and rides off with a soldier in the army. Throughout the dinner, Pedro and Tita sit staring at each other. Tita accepts the bouquet of roses from Pedro and she reciprocates the love with the lustful sauce. Here again, food becomes the medium to express their feelings which cannot otherwise be communicated. Gertrudis and Tita symbolize the two extremes of female sexuality, one hyper and the other, too powerless to be expressed.

Meanwhile, Rosaura delivers a baby boy, unattended by any doctor as the entire village was occupied by federal troops. Tita was all alone to help Rosaura during the delivery though the voice of Nancha's spirit guided her. The boy was named Roberto and Tita was so attached to the boy forgetting the fact that it is the son of her sister and Pedro, her love. She decides to cook Turkey Mole on the eve of Roberto's baptism. While preparing it, Pedro senses a new sensation on hearing the sounds of the utensils, browning almonds and Tita's song. The power of food in transmitting emotions is again exemplified in the novel: "Pedro knew from those sounds and smells, especially the smell of browning sesame seeds, that there was a real culinary pleasure to come" (62). In the kitchen, Pedro and Tita exchanges a gaze for some time, but too powerful that Pedro could transform Tita's flesh from "chaste to experienced" (63). The "experienced" Tita starts to produce breast milk to feed Roberto as Rosaura fails to do so. The plot alludes to the images of Virgin Mary and Jesus, a kind of intertextuality which most of the trauma narratives employ. This makes the text rich with many signifiers and exploits the infiniteness of language providing many ways for the readers to interpret.

Elena senses the bond between Tita and Pedro and decides to send Rosaura, Pedro and Roberto to San Antonio. This shatters Tita completely. Instead of Roberto, she starts to nurture a pigeon ignoring all her household duties. But her attempt to

find solace in the pigeon did not last long as the federal troops raided their home and destroyed the dovecote full of birds and pigeons. Adding to this grief, a news reached Tita from San Antonio that Roberto had died due to lack of nourishment. Mama Elena shouts at her for lamenting the death of Roberto and asks her to get back to work. Unable to repress her feelings, Tita is overpowered by a violent agitation. Instead of obeying her orders, “she started to tear apart all the sausages she could reach, screaming wildly” (89). Here, food is a tool for resistance besides a medium to communicate the inner trauma. Elena responds to the violent behavior of Tita by smashing her across the face with a wooden spoon. Tita's nose bleeds and she takes refuge in the dovecot. Elena and Chenchá, the house maid, get all the air out of the sausage and fills it up only to find the following week that it swarmed with worms. The sausage is contaminated by the agony and unsettled clashes of Tita's psyche.

Chenchá finds Tita feeding a dead pigeon and she was acting crazy. Mama Elena decides to send her to asylum. When Dr. Brown came to see Tita, she was so traumatized that “he found Tita naked, her nose broken, her whole body covered with pigeon droppings. A few feathers were clinging to her skin and hair. As soon as she saw the doctor, she ran to the corner and curled up in a fetal position” (90). Dr. Brown takes Tita with her. On leaving, Chenchá hands over the bedspread that Tita had knit during the hours of insomnia. It was too long and heavy that it dragged behind the carriage. She knit it with yarns of many colors, “that appeared and disappeared as if by magic in the gigantic cloud of dust that rose up behind it” (91). The bedspread with its enormous weight and varied colors is a symbol of Tita's heavy heart and the conflicting emotions within.

The symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is seen in Tita as she gets overwhelmed by an intense sense of cold similar to the one she had on Pedro's and Rosaura's wedding day. She feels numb and isolated. “There were many things she needed to work out in her mind, and she could not find the words to express the feelings seething inside her since she left the ranch. She was badly shaken” (98). Tita is reminded of Nancha when she meets a figure in the house, which is said to be Dr. Brown's dead grandmother. She is pacified and comforted by the presence of this silent woman. Dr. Brown assists Tita to work out her trauma. He tells her of the inner fire burning inside every human being and the need to conserve it. Tita felt sad at the fact that the match she lighted blew out persistently though she managed to light it every time. He then asks Tita to write on the wall the reason behind her silence to which she writes “Because I don't want to” (106). With these words Tita began to assert herself and identity, the first step towards working out her trauma.

It was the ox-tail soup that Chenchá brought to Tita from De La Garza that finally restored her stability. On consuming the soup, Tita thinks of the happy times she had with Nancha. And for the first time after her breakdown, she could recollect the recipe of the soup. She also cries with Chenchá thus letting out her pent up emotions. Meanwhile, Dr. Brown proposes Tita to which she agrees hoping to start a new life.

In the ranch, a group of Bandits attack Mama Elena and rape Chenchá. Tita comes home to look after them. She makes the same ox-tail soup and gives it to Elena but she refuses thinking that it is poisoned. But later she began to eat Tita's food but only after making Tita eat it before her. Within a month, Mama Elena dies and the reason was found to be the intake of massive doses of ipecac, a preventive syrup she took when she feared poisoning. Though Tita had suffered greatly at the hands of her mother, she is tormented by her death. When Tita dressed Elena's body for the funeral, she noticed the heart shaped locket hung around her neck with a tiny key inside. She knew that it was the key of the little box inside Elena's wardrobe. Opening it she found a bundle of letters and learnt that her mother too had a love unfulfilled. When she got pregnant by her lover, a Mulatto man, she decides to run away with him. But he was found murdered and Elena had to marry Tita's father much against her wishes. Deeply moved by the thwarted love of her mother, Tita swears in front of her tomb that “she would never renounce love” (126). She had to face the same fate and trauma as that of her mother, which brings in an element of transgenerational trauma into the narrative.

Rosaura is bedridden after delivering her second child but Tita actively involves in taking care of her niece. As against Pedro's wish to name his child as Josefita, Tita's real name, Tita names the child Esperanza. The name means hope as Tita does not want this younger daughter of the family share the same destiny of her by confining to the tradition. Later, Tita gets

annoyed by Rosaura's decision to stick on to tradition as well as Pedro's advice not to marry Dr. Brown. Disturbed by these thoughts, she makes champondongo, to serve when Dr. Brown visits her house. She felt the anger rise within her: "Tita was literally "like water for chocolate"-she was on the verge of boiling over" (155). After dinner when Dr. Brown leaves to America to bring her aunt for marriage, Pedro makes love to Tita. She feels that she might get pregnant as she misses her next period. Mama Elena's ghost appears before Tita and rebukes her for her relationship with Pedro. Tita confronts the ghost and affirms her stand: "I know who I am! A person who has a perfect right to live her life as she pleases. Once and for all, leave me alone. I won't put up with you! I hate you, I've always hated you!" (180). With these words, the ghost fade away and immediately Tita felt great relief, her body muscles relaxed and she had a violent menstrual flow. The ghost, reduced to a fireball sets fire to the drunken Pedro's body. Tita nurses Pedro which angers Rosaura. They both fight and Rosaura calls Tita a loose woman. After the fight, Tita goes to the kitchen and starts to cook. Soon she sees the chickens fight and there was a whirl of feathers, blood and dust. It changed into a mighty tornado destroying everything on its way. A hole was created and all the chickens got swallowed into it.

When Tita entered the kitchen, she found out that beans didn't cook which reminded her of Nancha's words that when people argue while making tamales, the tamales won't cook. Thus she remembered a moment when she felt great relief and began to sing "I am so happy since I have found you..." (197). Her thoughts were full of the intense moments she shared with Pedro. After the song, Tita checked the beans and found out that it was cooked well. After dinner Tita talks with Dr. Brown and discloses the moments she shared with Pedro. Dr. Brown was ready to accept Tita in spite of her relation with her lover. He leaves Tita behind asking her to decide to choose between him and Pedro.

The final chapter starts with the arrangements of another wedding. It is later revealed that years have passed and it is the wedding of Esperanza with Dr. Brown's son, Alex. All these years, Tita lived with Rosaura, Pedro and Esperanza. When Esperanza expressed her wish to marry Alex, her mother got furious as it is against the Mexican family custom. After days of argument, Rosaura dies emitting foul smell from her body. After the marriage, Pedro and Tita make love releasing the passion held so long. She experienced a climax intensely that she saw a tunnel before her. This reminded her of Dr. Brown's words that if an emotion could light all the candles within our heart then a splendid tunnel appears and the soul will seek for its divine origin leaving us lifeless. But she never wanted to die but to experience the same feeling again and again. For her it was a new beginning. But soon she realizes that Pedro died at the moment of ecstasy. Tita felt so lonely and a cold chill started to paralyze her. She tried to find refuge under the bedspread that she knit during the nights of insomnia and solitude. It was so long that it could cover almost three hectares. The length of the bedspread is indicative of the traumatic days that she had throughout her life. She needed fuel in her body so she opened the drawer and ate the candles that Dr. Brown had given her. As she chewed each candle, she pressed her eyes shut and thought of all the moments she had with Pedro. She saw the luminous figure of Pedro waiting for her. She moved towards him, "wrapped each other in an embrace" (213), experiencing a climax and left together for their lost Eden, never ever to be apart. Their body began to emit sparks which engulfed their body as well as the entire ranch. What remained under the many layers of ashes was the cookbook containing all the recipes that Tita makes in the novel.

Like Water for Chocolate centers around the traumatic life of Tita and the ways by which she tries to tackle with it. Laura Esquivel uses food as a pivotal tool in communicating and redressing the inner turmoil of the central character. Rather than merely communicating with words, Tita's trauma is felt to the other characters as well as the readers through the food that she prepares. More than having sympathy to the traumatized victim, we empathize with her as if we are overwhelmed by a greater part of her trauma. Use of symbols, magical realism, intertextuality and supernatural elements offer us more possibilities to witness, understand, feel and experience the trauma being narrated. Tita's story becomes our story and in the end, we feel like our soul searching its divine origin.

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